

28 Greats

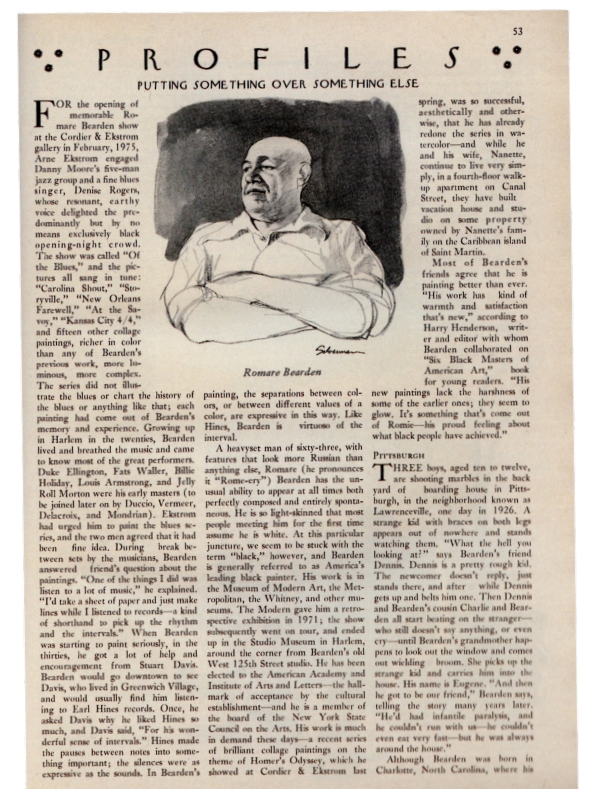
A Celebration of African-American Art and Artists



Romare Bearden

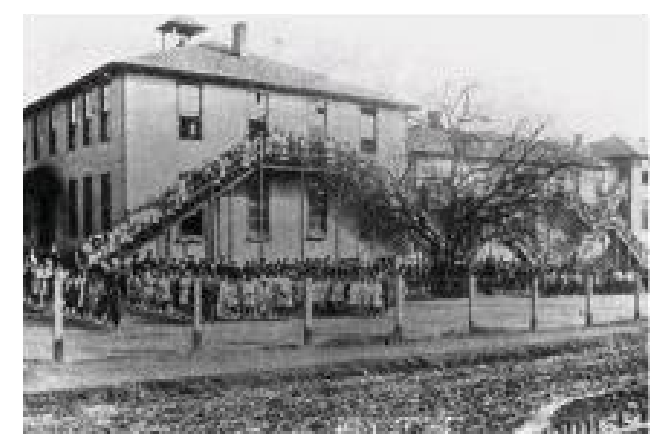
One of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance, artist and author **Romare Bearden** (1911-1988, left) revolutionized the use of collage to promote social and political change. Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, Bearden moved around frequently as a child, from Harlem to Pittsburgh, where his grandparents lived, and back again. He attended Lincoln University, Boston University, New York University and the Art Students League, studying under the German artist George Grosz. After serving on the front during WWII, he attended the Sorbonne, studying art history and philosophy. Around 1963 he discovered his true style and medium, collage; inspired by the March on Washington and the Civil Rights movement, Bearden used glossy magazine photographs, then a new development in publishing, to depict African-American culture and struggles in a contemporary manner. As an author, his *A History of African-American Artists*, written with Harry Henderson, remains an invaluable resource.

In 1977 the writer Calvin Tomkins interviewed Bearden for his "Profiles" section of *The New Yorker* (right, top). The retrospective quality of the article inspired Bearden to create the *Profiles* series, based upon his early recollections of life from North Carolina to Pittsburgh and Harlem. The first of these autobiographical collage paintings, *The Twenties: Mecklenburg County, School Bell Time* (1978, below), refers to the Myers Street School in Charlotte, North Carolina, that he attended as a young child (right, center). It blends paint and collage elements in a manner that creates a sense of depth and space, despite its flatness. Like many of his collages, *School Bell Time* contains art historical and cultural references; the figure at far left, for instance, incorporates the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Queen Mother Pendant Mask* from the Kingdom of Benin (right, bottom). Bearden's narrative description/subtitle of the painting recalls his early memory of the experience: *Once it was mid-September again, it was back to Miss Pinkney and books, black-boards, rulers and fingernail inspection.* Kingsborough Community College was fortunate to have acquired *School Bell Time*, the first of the *Profile* paintings and a highlight of the college's collection, in 1981.



Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles," *The New Yorker*, November 28, 1977.

Bearden created a second *Profiles* series of memories from the 1930s. Over the years the individual paintings have been sold and scattered to various museums and private collections. In 2019, however, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta reassembled almost all them, including *School Bell Time*, for the exhibition *Something Over Something Else: Romare Bearden's Profile Series*. The exhibition was well-received both at the High Museum and its follow-up venue, The Cincinnati Museum of Art.



Myers Street School, Charlotte, North Carolina.



Romare Bearden, *Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Mecklenburg County, School Bell Time*, 1978. Collage on board, 29 1/2 x 41 inches. Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York.



Queen Mother Pendant Mask: Iyoba, 16th Century. Bone/Ivory, 9 3/8 x 5 x 3 1/4 inches. Edo peoples, Nigeria, Court of Benin. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.